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ABSTRACT

This brief paper describes an innovative training project, the Augmentative, Assistive, and Facilitated Communication project, designed to enhance the capacity of school personnel to use alternative communication strategies with children having severe communication impairments. The project has provided training and technical assistance to school personnel, developed and disseminated model materials, and developed communication systems for 10 students selected as the project demonstration participants. Ten interdisciplinary teams from 10 schools in Maine, each supporting a student with a severe communication impairment, were provided a 2-day workshop on augmentative, alternative, and facilitated communication. Following the workshop, participants received monthly on-site and distance technical assistance in implementing the communication system. A state-wide conference of all 10 teams is planned, following which the project will be formally evaluated. (DB)

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An Innovative Training Project: Enhancing the Capacity of School Personnel in Maine to Promote the Use of Alternative Communication Strategies for Students with Disabilities

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This paper presents an overview, the goals ,objectives, activities and preliminary evaluation data of an innovative training project designed to enhance the capacity of school personnel to promote the use of alternative communication strategies for children with severe communication impairments. The project entitled, Augmentative, Assistive, and Facilitated Communication, which is being conducted by The Center for Community Inclusion (CCI), Maine's UAP at the University of Maine, is funded by the Maine Department of Education. More than 100 students with multiple disabilities and more than 300 students with autism have been identified in the state of Maine. In order to assure efficacious and inclusive education for these students consistent with the Learning Results Educational Reform effort in the state, which is founded on the principles that all students given equal opportunity can learn, the aim of all students becoming clear and effective communicators is targeted in this project.

The goals of this project are

- 1) provision of training and technical assistance as a means to enhance the capacity of school personnel to meet the communication needs of students with disabilities,
- 2) development and dissemination of model materials, and
- 3) the development of communication systems for the ten students in the state who were selected as the demonstration participants for this project.

To conduct the project, ten interdisciplinary teams from 10 schools throughout the state of Maine, each supporting a student with a severe communication impairment were selected through a competitive application procedure. Following a two day workshop in which information and skill related to augmentative, alternative and facilitated communication were shared, each team worked with the project staff through monthly on-site and distance technical assistance to implement the communication system for the student and increase the teamÕs knowledge and skill for future work with students with communication impairments. Dissemination activities to make essential knowledge and skill guidance available statewide are planned.

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Project Procedures

Initially, the project was publicized through on-line posting and mailings to special education administrators, parents, professional organizations and associations and all school districts. The competitive application materials were then distributed following which ten demonstration teams and students were selected for participation.

In order to be considered for the project the following criteria needed to be addressed in the application materials completed by each team:

- 1) each school based team had to be working with a student who had a recent (within the past six months) communication assessment indicating the need for augmentative, assistive, and or/ facilitated communication,
- 2) each team had to be comprised of at least one special educator, one regular educator, one speech-language clinician, one related service professional and one parent or family member,
- 3) the teams had to demonstrate a commitment to participate in ongoing intensive technical assistance and capacity building,
- 4) the team had to indicate a commitment to participate in both fall and spring training workshops, and
- 5) the team had to complete a pre test component of the summative evaluation assessing current knowledge and skill in the area of augmentative , assistive and facilitated communication.

Of the 21 applications that were received 19 met the five inclusion criteria. The eligible applicants were evaluated and ten were selected based on need and the extent to which their desired outcomes as specified on the application were consistent with the intent of the project. To illustrate , the following is an example of a desired outcome articulated by one of the teams accepted into the project: "M's medications have been decreased over the past six months and she will be off all medication at the end of October. As a result of this decrease, M has become more interactive with her environment... The team feels that this is an ideal time to attempt to develop a communication system for M. The team feels that we have many pieces but need help in coordinating a program."

An additional outcome articulated by the same team was "to use the information gained to develop communications systems for at least four other students within this district."

An example of an application that did not meet the criteria for the project was submitted by a special education teacher. No documentation regarding a recent communication assessment indicating the need for augmentative, assistive, and or/ facilitated communication was included with the application. Additionally no team members were identified on the application.

The initial two day workshop was designed to focus on the ten teams' development of expert knowledge and skill in the following areas:

- 1) collaboration with the CCI team in the selection of a communication medium,
- 2) working with the student to support and teach the use of the communication medium is an inclusive educational setting,
- 3) working with school personnel to modify and align curricula and student assessment to meet the special needs of student with severe communication impairment who are learning to or using augmentative, assistive and or facilitated communication,

- 4) working with school personnel and parents to build the capacity of the school district to provide inclusive educational opportunities for all student with severe communication impairments, and

- 5) completing a technical assistance plan (TAP) to be enacted during the project year.

The agenda for the workshop was tailored to address the results of a needs assessment included in the application materials. The topics for the workshop were:

- 1. A brief overview of assistive technology, facilitated communication and augmentative communication and
- 2. student centered learning
- 3. an explanation of the on-line component of the project and
- 4. a review of the paperwork designed to facilitate development of the TAP.
- 5. a session eliciting input regarding the content to be included in the next workshop
- 6. Initial AT, AAC and FC assessment considerations,
- 7. funding
- 8. 2 concurrent breakout sessions workshops
    - a. facilitated communication and
    - b. Maine's Learning Results and students with disabilities.

Additionally, all teams were given time to network with each other as they requested and share their strength and concerns as related to the project. Assistive technology, augmentative and alternative communication devices were made available by both the project staff and the ten teams for hands on experience.

Attendance at the workshops revealed that members of all teams participated in booth workshops

Although planned, completion of the TAP by the end of the second workshop was not accomplished by the teams and later deadline was set. Several issues may have impacted the teams' ability to complete the TAP. For example, one team needed additional time to establish a time to meet on a regular basis. This team required planning which took longer than the Oct. 29 workshop to establish these regular meeting times. Another team was unable to establish a meeting time where all team members could meet to complete the TAP and needed to have team members work on the plan separately. Another issue that may have impacted the development of the TAP is that factors affecting some teams frequently changed during the project year. For example one student who was undergoing medication change, was unable to participate in classroom activities on a regular basis for several months of the project. This fluctuating status made it difficult for the team to assess the students needs for an augmentative assistive technology system although initial goals have been developed. Another student was removed from his home by the Department of Human Services and relocated into another school district. Despite these factors all but two teams had completed the TAP by the expanded deadline,. The evaluation data regarding the ability of the technical staff to meet the TAP of each team is ongoing and additional factors affecting the TAP process will be part of the project evaluation,

As part of the TAP, the project staff have been providing on-site technical assistance to each team on a monthly basis. along with on line and phone contact available to each team. In addition to providing the ten school based teams with support. Thirteen students have been provided with technical assistance by various members of the project team. Assistance has included the following:

- 1. A parent of a student who received Dragon Dictate technology requested assistance in finding someone to train her son to use this new technology. Project staff contacted a local college student with an interest in computer technology to provide this training.

- 2. Resources regarding software and assistive technology were made available by project staff in response to specific requests. Additionally, the project team regularly respond to requested for information and resources posted on the Department of Education First Class conferencing system.

- Project activities which still remain to be completed include :

  - 1) a statewide conference to be conducted in late April in which the ten teams will share their experiences and expertise in the morning. In the afternoon, sessions will be devoted to skill building in the area of augmentative, alternative and facilitated communication and assistive technology. At present the following workshop activities are planned:
    - 1) a switch making workshop,
    - 2) a workshop on writing Assistive Technology goals into the IEP and
    - 3) a vendor display...

    The ten teams and the project team also will participate in dissemination activities, including conferences and training within the state of Maine. Additional efforts for dissemination of project activities include the distribution of a project newsletter, continuos updating and maintenance of a clearing house of information , continued dissemination of project results at local and national conferences, and distribution of training materials developed for the intensive workshop training as well as ongoing training by the end of the project.

  - Evaluation

    The evaluation plan addresses the extent to which the ten teams perceive that their training needs as articulated in the competitive application were met. These data are currently being analyzed and will be reported. Evaluation of the final project conference will examine the extent to which the ten teams effectively communicated their new knowledge and skill to the statewide audience and the satisfaction of conference participants with the topics and sessions.

    Finally, the effectiveness of this capacity building training and technical assistance model will be analyzed and findings will be disseminated at the end of the project year.